



Cedarville University
DigitalCommons@Cedarville

The Research and Scholarship Symposium

The 2018 Symposium

Apr 11th, 3:00 PM - 3:30 PM

Sondheim: His Influence on Musical Theatre

Jordan Fredericks
jdfredericks@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research_scholarship_symposium



Part of the [Composition Commons](#), and the [Other Music Commons](#)

Fredericks, Jordan, "Sondheim: His Influence on Musical Theatre" (2018). *The Research and Scholarship Symposium*. 15.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research_scholarship_symposium/2018/podium_presentations/15

This Podium Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Research and Scholarship Symposium by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.



SONDHEIM: HIS INFLUENCE ON MUSICAL THEATRE

Jordan Fredericks

CU Research and Scholarship Symposium

April 29, 2018

Since its beginning with *The Black Crook* in 1866, American musical theatre has undergone huge directional shifts. Conceptually, the music and story of *Oklahoma!* from the 1940s is almost entirely different from the music of [title of show] and *Ordinary Days* from the mid-2000s. When investigating this dramatic transformation of the genre, the root of the change appears strongest at the 1950s. These years were the beginning years of Stephen Sondheim's entrance into the realm of musical theatre. Comparatively, Sondheim brought in a new approach to the genre and published shows that produced revolutionized musicals that had not been seen before in previous shows. Due to the creative uniqueness he had during the prime of his career and the comparison of shows before and after his appearance in the genre, Stephen Sondheim has significantly impacted what American musical theatre is in modern times.

Long before Sondheim, musicals had been developing to the genre of musical theatre seen in the nineteenth century. According to Marc Bauch, an American Literature and Mathematics professor from Germany, "there has always been a close relation between drama and music."¹ Musical integration had already been included in many of the dramas of ancient Greece,² including dance, spectacle, song, and instrumental music, making it every bit as musical as musical theatre today.³ In addition, the eighteenth century introduced the ballad opera, a popular and early form of musical theatre popularizing English language in music theatre, with John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* being the first of its kind.⁴ Advancing forward to the next century, there were composers such as Wagner in the early to mid-nineteenth century that strongly believed in the integration of drama and music that helped advance the development of

¹ Marc Bauch. *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 15.

² Ibid.

³ Nathan Hurwitz. *A History of the American Musical Theatre* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.

⁴ Ibid., 10.

musical theatre even further. Finally, *The Black Crook* opened in 1866⁵ and is considered to be the first American musical by many historians.⁶ Ever since ancient Greece, music and theater had been gradually forming the beginning of American musical theatre in the nineteenth century.

With *The Black Crook* as the beginning of the genre, early American musical theatre contrasted Sondheim's work in that it was mainly lighthearted comedy with not much depth. The most popular styles of the time were comic operas (also known as opera bouffes), the operetta, musical comedies, and revues, which were, as their titles suggest, comical.⁷ They were meant as entertainment to those in attendance. One popular genre within the American musical style that shows the entertainment focus very well is vaudeville, a genre of musical comedy involving several acts of dancing, singing, or other talents that was originally created by Tony Pastor in 1881 and then mainly publicized, expanded, and marketed by Benjamin F. Keith and Edward F. Albee in 1883.⁸ Light entertainment had been a theme in Europe and had influenced American musical theatre, making it highly commercial. This made musical theatre, especially Broadway, more of a business or a profitable art that focused on enjoyment.⁹ These styles of shows focused on lightheartedness and escape from reality rather than the thought and depth that Sondheim presents in his shows.

While before World War I American musical theatre had been mainly entertainment, the duration and aftermath of the war brought about more serious material in the art. Before World War I, shows such as *The Black Crook* were mainly made to be commercial and had little to do

⁵ Marc Bauch. *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 37.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ John Kenrick. *Musical Theatre: A History* (New York, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Incorporated, 2008), 96-97.

⁹ Brooks McNamara. "Broadway: A Theatre Historian's Perspective." *TDR* (1988-) 45, no. 4 (2001): 125-28. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.cedarville.edu/stable/1146932>, 126.

with deep thought. In fact, most of the audiences for early American musical theatre were bloated with “tired businessmen who wanted to see pretty young girls cavorting around the stage in attractive or scanty costumes.”¹⁰ Even *The Black Crook* is known for its naked ballet dancers, which was perceived as “marketable,” thereby enforcing the commercial focus in the genre.¹¹ Although this was the nature of the genre before World War I, Americans began to reject the European tradition of light entertainment and began to favor American music that focused on reality, such as ragtime.¹² This shift in tradition and desire shaped the following years to produce shows of higher quality and maturity that had not yet been seen before in the genre.¹³ Composers and lyricists were beginning to experiment with “simple settings, smaller casts, developed characters as well as real situations,” which began the movement away from the pre-World War I light entertainment and into the post-World War I environment of more serious topics and high quality fine arts.¹⁴

The post-World War I era presented the beginning of real situations in American musical theatre and began the redefinition of it, which brought about a composer and libretto duo that renewed the genre: Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Before coming together as a duo, both men were already initially successful. While Rodgers was off composing with Lorenz Hart making it big by becoming “the hottest talents on Broadway” in the late 1920’s to early 1930’s,¹⁵ Hammerstein was off working with Jerome Kern on shows like *Show Boat*, which

¹⁰ Nathan Hurwitz. *A History of the American Musical Theatre* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 143.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹² Marc Bauch. *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵ John Kenrick. *Musical Theatre: A History* (New York, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Incorporated, 2008), 179.

served as the “forerunner of the serious musicals of the 1940’s and 1950’s” by dealing with themes like racial prejudice and marital problems while also being their greatest success.¹⁶ Working together, Rodgers and Hammerstein reinvented the American musical theatre with their show *Oklahoma!* that introduced many contrasts with the earlier conception of the genre. Rather than beginning with a large opening number, the show opens with a solo sung by the main character.¹⁷ Rather than accepting that the audience would be filled with lustful businessmen that were looking for scantily dressed women, Rodgers and Hammerstein only brought in the female ensemble, which were fully clothed, in the latter half of the first act.¹⁸ Rather than writing songs purely for entertainment or escape, *Oklahoma!* gave way to the ideal that “when the emotion or dramatic tension became too heightened for ordinary speech to suffice, characters were lifted into song, and the climax of the song would usually be the climax of the scene.”¹⁹ The post-World War I era brought this dynamic duo together and they became major influences in the way of American musical theatre.

Although Rodgers and Hammerstein began the reconstruction and direction of the genre, American musical theater in the early stages still seemed to be light and entertaining to provide an escape from reality. Shows like *Oklahoma!* and *Show Boat* may have dealt with serious themes, but they still were only the beginning of this new direction. The early writers of musical theatre did not ignore the serious themes, but they still brightened the with bright colors.²⁰ In *Oklahoma!*, the deep plot of Laurey and Curly and the obstacles they face to be together is

¹⁶ Marc Bauch. *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 24-25.

¹⁷ Nathan Hurwitz. *A History of the American Musical Theatre*. (New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 143.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁰ Marc Bauch. *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 29.

balanced by the comic-relief sub-plot of Ado Annie and Will Parker's relationship, which became the standard structure for musicals.²¹ Still being in an era of Broadway entertainment and only recently being broadened, early musicals had the essence of the shows and musicals that came before them. It allowed their audiences to escape from reality, such as World War II that was occurring outside any theater showing *Oklahoma!*.²² Most young writers of musical theatre followed this escapism.²³ Each musical, even though Americans had moved past the idea of light entertainment borrowed from Europe, still had that essence of show business entertainment and remained lighter maintain this escape from reality.

Although the realm of musical theatre seemed to be steeped in this concept of escape from reality, the reinvention of the genre was close on the horizon as Stephen Sondheim entered the world. While musical theatre was developing in the 1930s, Stephen Sondheim was born in 1930 to Herbert and Janet "Foxy" Sondheim.²⁴ While growing up through his adolescent years, Sondheim lived through a rough family life. When Sondheim was ten years old, his father had left his mother.²⁵ As well as this, his mother essentially used him as a "substitute for his father," using him to satisfy her emotional and sexual desires.²⁶ Even though his childhood was not ideal, he still had exposure to music at a very early age, taking piano lessons and listening to his father play the piano when entertaining at home.²⁷ Sondheim's difficult childhood and early exposure to music are both key factors in his lead-in to musical theatre.

²¹ Nathan Hurwitz. *A History of the American Musical Theatre* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 144.

²² Marc Bauch. *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 28.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: a life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, 1998), 3-4.

²⁵ Ibid., 22.

²⁶ Ibid., 31.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

The reason why his experiences while he was young are important is because it eventually led Sondheim to meet his first musical theatre mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, who taught some of Sondheim's most important musical theatre lessons. In the summer of 1942, Sondheim met Jamie Hammerstein, son of Oscar Hammerstein, and Sondheim quickly became the "boy who came to dinner."²⁸ Due to her destructive nature and the psychological damage she frequently inflicted on Sondheim, the Hammerstein's became a place of refuge for him²⁹ and this most likely led Oscar to becoming a surrogate father to Sondheim.³⁰ As Sondheim loved him like a father, he commented that "he would have followed him blindly" no matter the profession Oscar would have gone into.³¹ Fortunately for the world of musical theatre, Oscar was interested in musical theatre. Subsequently, Sondheim followed his 'adoptive father's' footsteps. Sondheim's first attempt at writing a musical was *By George* and when Sondheim presented it to Oscar, Oscar commented that it was the worst thing he had ever read.³² Although this is seemingly discouraging, it taught Sondheim the power of "choosing every word with meticulous care, while at the same time finding the right balance between saying too little and too much."³³ In addition, Oscar also taught Sondheim that "songs had to carry the dramatic action forward," which arguably could have made Sondheim into being one of the greatest lyricists in musical theatre.³⁴ These lessons from his first musical theatre mentor helped push Sondheim and steered him forward to reshaping musical theatre.

²⁸ Ibid., 32.

²⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁰ Ibid., 51.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 52.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Marc Bauch. *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 114.

As Sondheim grew older, he began to further walk down the path to changing musical theatre. After his grade school years, Sondheim attended Williams college where he enrolled as an English major while taking music as an elective.³⁵ While studying there, Oscar got Sondheim to work on several apprentice musicals at college, including *All That Glitters* and *Saturday Night*.³⁶ After he graduated from college and received a \$3000 Hutchinson Prize, Sondheim switched from studying English to studying music composition from the avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt, a composer of mainly atonal music.³⁷ While Oscar Hammerstein II taught him musical theatre, Babbitt was more focused on the music and taught Sondheim many musical mechanics, such as “orchestration, thematic development, the use of dissonance, harmonic rhythm, and complex counterpoint.”³⁸ This apprenticeship with Babbitt can be seen as equally important in shaping Sondheim’s future career since his studies with Oscar taught him about theatre and kept him involved in the realm while Babbitt taught Sondheim about how to be a composer and more about the core of music.³⁹ These studies as he grew older strengthened Sondheim’s presence and work in both music and theatre.

Sondheim’s continued pursuit in theatre and music eventually led him to the first step of his career and changing the perspective on musical theatre: his lyrical work on *West Side Story*. Sondheim’s work spread from person to person and with a lucky break, he received the opportunity to work alongside Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins, and Leonard Bernstein on *West*

³⁵ Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: a life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, 1998), 65.

³⁶ Robert McLaughlin. *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 17.

³⁷ Stephen Citron. *Sondheim & Lloyd-Webber: The New Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 2001), 66.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

Side Story.⁴⁰ Laurents wrote the book, Robbins choreographed and directed, Bernstein composed the music, and Sondheim wrote the lyrics. With this team of experts in each field, the show essentially took every technique of musical theatre, “took it as far as it could be taken,” and resulted in the “one of the most successfully integrated musicals ever.”⁴¹ *West Side Story* had every aspect of musical theatre at this point blended and seamed together as well as it could be. Not only this, it also reconstructed musical theatre, encouraging people to utilize and embrace the many different aspects of the genre as well as introducing pieces of postmodern theory into the works.⁴² Rather than having the traditional happy ending and social unity that Hammerstein and before had been emphasizing, *West Side Story* breaks the tradition and brings up social chaos and dysfunction.⁴³ *West Side Story* opened the doors for a new type of musical theatre to enter the stage, which Sondheim reached for and pursued.

After his work on *West Side Story*, Sondheim continued to reinvent the idea of musical theatre with more of his works. He worked with Laurents and Robbins again on their next show, *Gypsy*, which pushes postmodern theory and beliefs even further by metaphorically inserting details and depictions about the American Dream.⁴⁴ Based on the evidence provided in Sondheim’s first major works, it becomes evident that there is a common theme in which Sondheim continues where his shows produce thought and immersion into reality. Many of his later works, such as *Into the Woods*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Company*, all end in a similar way: they leave the audience in a thoughtful state of conflict with some form of

⁴⁰ Robert McLaughlin. *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

resolution. For example, *Company* ends with Bobby's song "Being Alive," where he considers all that he has seen and tries to comprehend the idea of relationships and his own personal view. In addition, Sondheim also brings many serious and dark themes into the picture. *West Side Story* discusses rape, immigration, and other serious issues of the like, and in *Into the Woods*, everyone except Red Riding Hood, Jack, the Baker, and Cinderella die. Before then, there had only been small glimpses of such topics, such as the issues portrayed in *Show Boat*, whereas Sondheim's works immersed the audience into the issues without brightening up the topics. Because of the many instances where Sondheim pushes towards a different perspective and focus in his works, he reshaped the way musical theatre is seen today.

When considering the many works that he has worked on and their topics, I believe there to be a connection in Sondheim's work with his complicated life. A significant portion of reshaping musical theatre is the shift in subject matter, from the idea of light entertainment to Sondheim's addition of dark and much more 'real' themes. Comparing the subject matter of his shows to his life, there are many parallels. For example, Sondheim has seen several different kinds of relationships in his life, including his parents' broken marriage and then the Hammerstein's better relationship. In Sondheim and George Furth's *Company*, the story follows the life of Robert, affectionately referred to as Bobby by his friends in the show, and how he sees almost every kind of relationship there can be. He sees a broken marriage, a homosexual interest, a dovey wife and less affectionate husband, and working relationship, the girl that slips away, and so forth, and each of these can be seen as a parallel in his own life. The broken marriage relates to his parents, the working relationship relates to the Hammerstein's, and the homosexual relationship can be referring to his own life. As well as this, you have the relationship of Rapunzel and the Witch from *Into the Woods* where the mother is evil and occasionally brutal to

the child, which seems akin to his Sondheim's relationship with his mother. While this could be seen as purely coincidental, the similarity seems too uncanny to be as such. Because of parallels such as these, I believe that Sondheim incorporates his personal life of seemingly 'real' themes into his works.

Sondheim's influence of bringing more personal and 'real' subjects into the picture is important because it opens the flood gates for shows after to deal more with differentiating subject material that had not been seen in musical theatre thus far. Now that Sondheim had introduced a new trail of subject material in musical theatre, other musical theatre genres have arisen on or near Broadway that diverge away from the traditional Rodgers and Hammerstein shows, such as rock musicals, concept musicals, and the traditional book shows.⁴⁵ The subject material in these shows, such as *Hair*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Dude*, now dealt with more 'real' concepts and followed a more post-modern view of art and music that Sondheim had begun to introduce in his shows such as *Gypsy*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *A Little Night Music*. Even the music of these shows demonstrated this new push because whereas music before Sondheim was tuneful and easy to sing to, his music was more artistic and complicated, such as the song *Color and Light* from *Sunday in the Park with George* where George is singing a series of fast staccato notes to represent the dots that he is painting which is not easily sung from an audience perspective. As Robert McLaughlin summarizes in his book *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical*, "Stephen Sondheim, more than any other composer, lyricist, or playwright, has stretched the horizon of expectations for the musical theater and in the

⁴⁵ John Kenrick. *Musical Theatre: A History* (New York, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Incorporated, 2008), 319.

process not only created a new kind of musical but also a new kind of audience for musicals.”⁴⁶

Sondheim brings a new perspective to the genre by incorporating his own life and post-modern views, which in turn brings on a new generation of musicals, making him the ultimate influencer and center piece of the new style.

It is clear from the distant history and present events of American musical theatre that Stephen Sondheim has entirely reshaped the genre. While Broadway shows that are purely for entertainment that are similar to what the first shows on Broadway were like still dominate the stage, Sondheim creates a new venue that engages the audience to think more. He creates serious works that “break the rules and defy the conventions and thus surprise their audiences and advance the art form” and “stretch the horizon of expectations in such a way that audiences can move with them.”⁴⁷

Because of this reinvention of musical theatre that introduces different subject material on the stage and a new audience, I believe it is important to end with a closing question: so what? More specifically, why should Christians care about this new approach? Because of Sondheim, there are many shows that allow the audience to think and see a new point of view, which is a double-edged sword. On one side of the blade, this new kind of show allows easy access to portray a distorted worldview of reality where the artist can show their reality, which more often than not is dark; however, the other side of the blade is that it does allow the artist to depict their reality. The reality is shown onstage for the audience to view and contemplate, which can deeply affect or move them. In light of this, this could very well allow Christian artists that desire to write musical theatre to influence the audience towards the body of Christ. As stated in the ideal

⁴⁶ Robert McLaughlin. *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 242.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 241-242.

that Hammerstein introduced in *Oklahoma!*, “when the emotion or dramatic tension became too heightened for ordinary speech to suffice, characters were lifted into song, and the climax of the song would usually be the climax of the scene.”⁴⁸ Music and theatre have the power to move audiences more than ordinary speech can at times and while it can be used for more negative reasons, it can also be used to emotionally encourage the audience and allow audiences to understand a character’s anguish, emotion, or point of view. Because of Stephen Sondheim’s impact on musical theatre as shown through the comparison of musical theatre before, during, and after the prime of his career, he has created the emergence of a new kind of show and audience, and this can allow Christians to significantly impact their audience.

⁴⁸ Nathan Hurwitz. *A History of the American Musical Theatre*. (New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 144.

Bibliography

- Bauch, Marc. *The American Musical*. Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003.
- Citron, Stephen. *Sondheim & Lloyd-Webber: The New Musical*. (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 2001),
- Hurwitz, Nathan. *A History of the American Musical Theatre*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Kenrick, John. *Musical Theatre: A History*. New York, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Incorporated, 2008.
- McLaughlin, Robert. *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.
- McNamara, Brooks. "Broadway: A Theatre Historian's Perspective." *TDR (1988-)* 45, no. 4 (2001): 125-28. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.cedarville.edu/stable/1146932>.
- Secrest, Meryle, *Stephen Sondheim: a life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, 1998.